

D.Day and the memory of Dunkirk

by John Barnes

13/18 Royal Hussars

The following story is an extract from a recording made of Sgt. John Barnes of the 13/18 Royal Hussars. The full story can be found at The British Imperial War Museum in the audio/video department.

It is hard to remember everything. We had taken part in a number of invasion exercises during the spring of 1944. Many will remember places like FORT GEORGE, so it will be difficult to believe that on June 5th as we lay in the bright sunshine outside of Gosport that we were on the eve of the invasion of FRANCE.

On that morning we had received our maps, and for the first time, showing which section of the beach we were going to land.

The 13/18 Royal Hussars were going to spearhead the invasion.

D.D tanks to be launched 8000 yards off the shore: H hour minus 7minutes and to land on and hold Sword beach until the main forces arrived. Then to support the 3rd BRITISH INFANTRY and to assist the SUFFOLK REGIMENT to take the German strong points named MORRIS, then to attack and take HILLMAN.

Leaving England, the journey across the channel was something many will always remember. Somehow we managed to sleep aboard the LTC that night, as the invasion had been put back until the morning of June 6th for reason of bad weather. Early that morning the word 'GO' was given.

With a heavy swell and strong winds the landing craft took up their position, in the mist, heading for the French coast. One or two tummies were feeling the effects of the heavy swell and with the sickly look on some faces, dry land could not come quick enough. Even a cheerful wisecrack could not bring a smile – many had their own thoughts, 'how many would see England again'.

During the crossing my mind wondered back to Sept 3rd 1939. At 11oclock that morning, standing by our beds at the barracks at SHORNCLIFF, war was declared.

We had only arrived back from INDIA 6 months earlier, to take over Tanks, and as a Cavalry regiment, we were used to horses only.

By the 18th Sept. the regiment was in FRANCE at the town of BREST. We were told that we had the finest tanks in the world. German tanks were as thin as cardboard. Later we found out how strong that thin cardboard was! Still the British soldier will tackle anything with confidence and struggle ahead. Such was the officers and men of the 13/18 Royal Hussars QMO. Even if badly trained (many untrained soldiers were sent to join the experienced, and with poor equipment). Many lessons were learnt in the next 8 months.

Leaving BREST we moved to BORIE NOTRE DAME, 8 miles south of ARRAS. Here we learnt about tank warfare.

We spent 7 days in the SOMME valley. This period was called the phoney war. There were several false alarms about when we would move up to our forward billet at LA-VERDERIE on the Belgian border.

In May the Germans entered Holland and the phoney war was over.

Ahead of us was a 200-mile drive to BRUSSELS. Girls showered us with garlands of flowers and kisses; little did we realise the reception we would get on our return.

At our forward point called BRIEL we met the German infantry and pushed them back 5 miles to a place called TIRLEMONT and here we met the real German forces. There was nothing cardboard about their tanks. They blew us to pieces, no way could we stop them- this was real war, men killed and wounded. All we could do was fight a rear guard action, helping the infantry.

We were told of the BELGIANS surrender and the Germans were trying to cut us off. No sleep for 5 days, tired and weary, we did our best.

Many brave deeds and great bravery were shown in the fighting at BRUSSELS, YPES, POPERINGE and on the Albert canal right flank. Here we were ordered to support the Black Watch regiment to counter attack and hold the West Bank of the Albert canal and hold our position against all attacks for 2 hours.

I was told to dismount from my carrier, by an infantry Sgt. and go to the back door of the farmhouse, informing me that after he placed a hand Grenade through the front door, any Germans that were left would come out of the back door and would run on to my bayonet. Heart thumping I ran to the back door. I could feel the heat of a burning haystack on my back.

I looked around and at that moment a German came out of the door like a hare. Taken by surprise, I chased him at full speed with rifle and bayonet out stretched in front of me. In the heat of the moment I did not realise that there was a 10ft.wall around the yard. The German stopped at the wall and turned, but at the speed I was running I could not stop. The bayonet went into him and as it struck the wall I was brought to a sudden stop, our faces nearly touching. For a few moments we stared at each other, his eyes glazed as he slowly sank to the ground.

I stood looking at him as the bayonet came away, a gurgling noise from his throat, I knew he was dead. I walked away and sat on a box, crying and sick, not knowing for how long. I felt a hand on my shoulder and the voice of Sgt Major Parks saying, "come on son you will get used to that before this war is over". How right he was! Two years later killing Germans did not worry me, but I still remember those eyes.

After a long battle we entered POPERINGE. German shelling was very heavy so it was decided to move to CROMBEKE.

At this point the Germans were racing towards PROVEN with the intent of cutting us off, so we made our dash to STAVELE.

Here we stood our ground holding the German advance, on successive days, from the 23rd May, at FLEURBAIX we had fought our way to the LA LYS CANAL. Then 24th May to CASSEL and on to LE NIEPPE and CLAIRMARAIS, 25th May we were at ARMENTTIERES.

On the 26th May we were off to KEMMEL holding ground at PLOEGSTEEN.

On 28th May we attacked German motorbike troops. 29th May at YPES, POPERINGE and at STAVELE we held the Germans until the 30th May. There had been no sleep for anyone in 10 days. That night everyone managed to get a few hours sleep before the next morning.

We took up our positions at GHYVELDE on the 31st May. Our orders were to hold our position until all the ammo had been used, then destroy the tanks and make our way to BRAY DUNES.

At this point the roads were blocked with lorries that were on fire with black smoke everywhere. We were in the act of destroying our tanks when out of the smoke came a regiment of the guards in full marching order. The RSM said "bring those tanks along with us, we are going to hold the line". I said to him, "we have been fighting rear guard actions since the Germans invaded, where do we get petrol and ammunition?" He looked at us and said "Yes lads you look as though you have had a rough time, good luck when you get to DUNKIRK."

We watched him with his regiment march through the smoke and out of sight.

1st of June, tired and weary, I arrived on the beach at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Straining my eyes I saw what looked like black lines stretching out to sea. I became aware that they were men wading out to small boats, and what looked like logs rolling on the edge of the water were dead bodies.

Within minutes of arriving on the beach I had to dive for cover as dive-bombers came in low spraying the beach with machine guns and dropping their bombs.

For the next 12 hours the sand dunes became our haven. All that afternoon, as we made our way to the Mole (this was a jetty 5 miles away). We were bombed, machine gunned or shelled. Our fingers would claw at the sand and arch our backs expecting bullets to rip into them. Then, a dull moment as we lifted our heads, a scream over on the right and a moan somewhere ahead as we saw the first aid man comforting those who had been hit.

It was still light by the time I arrived at the Mole to find the jetty had just about been blown to bits. Stretchers had been put over the gaps, oil tanks were on fire, and HMS Jaguar was just going out astern when we managed to climb aboard.

A mile out to sea the bombers dived out of the sky. On deck we clung to anything as the ship heeled from side to side. As she was hit men were blown over the side. Next to me a chap called Harris, he was shouting "my legs" as he slid past me, I saw a lump of shrapnel sticking out of his back. Next thing I was in the water, kicking off my boots and webbing, I started to swim back to shore.

Another night was spent on the beach and next day I got away from DUNKIRK on a hospital ship.

June 2nd I landed at SOUTHAMPTON then sent to a place in SHIRLEY. After all details had been collected I was sent home to await orders.

After the regiment assembled we were given small armoured cars. Our job was to catch enemy pilots during the battle of BRITAIN.

Then we moved to TOWCESTER. Some men left to go to the Far East. New and younger men joined us from training camps. Our next move was to SKIPTON and here we trained with SHERMAN TANKS. Unfortunately we were not too successful on the moors, and during our training whispers of letters like DD, which was some 'form of tank' were heard.

We moved to FRITTON near YARMOUTH, here we signed the Secret Act and saw, for the first time, a D.D Sherman tank. A normal 30-ton tank, but one could see, running all around the deck, was a canvas screen neatly folded, at the after end were 2 propellers attached to the tank's hull. These could be raised or lowered, moved left or right by the driver, once the tank was in water and the canvas screen had been inflated by air from air bottles.

The movement and the change of engine noise and the landing craft moving faster and further out of the side of the invasion fleet brought me back to reality - I knew we were going to take up position well ahead of the fleet. Our job that lay ahead was to be launched two and half miles off shore, the D.D tanks to swim ashore - to take and hold the beach until the invasion fleet arrived, then support the Suffolk regiment.

August 1942 a reconnaissance force carried out a raid on DIEPPE to test coastal defences and to try out the technique for landing tank assault force over open beaches.

This was achieved at the cost of human lives. Out of 5000 there were 3500 casualties!

After many trials the D.D tanks or swimming tanks, they were now called, were to carry out the assault on the beaches.

On D.Day this secret design put a strain and responsibility on the officers and men of the regiment. They could not talk to anyone; each man had to sign the Official Secrets Act.

When the tracks of the tank came into contact with the shore, in approximately 5ft of water, the commander gave the order to the driver to break the struts. This was done by a hydraulic plunger, the screen would fall to the deck as air was released from the pillows, and it then became a fighting tank.

Each man had to under go training with deep sea Davis Submerged Escape Apparatus. This was a very important part of training but many were not happy with this type of Apparatus, never the less everyone was brought up to the final stage.

Once accomplished we found it an experience never to be forgotten. A water tank, which cut down only the driver's compartment and a turret, was placed at the bottom of a 30ft well.

The crew dressed in tank overalls took their places with Davis S.E.A. adjusted at the ready. Hatches pulled down and shut. At a signal, 3000 gallons of water per minute

was poured on top of the crew until the tank was full, the apparatus had to be fitted to each member, the tank commander, opened the hatch - then the crew would surface if using the apparatus correctly.

This training was very hard especially if the tank sank in sea exercises.

For the next two years, the regiment was engaged in heavy training at WICKHAM. Here we met for the first time the D.D Sherman tank that was to be used on D-Day. Then to Linney Head firing range, and on to Gosport for Navy training for DESA - we got used to the navy language, port your helm, starboard, port etc.

SCOTLAND, the next stop was Fort George; no one in the regiment will ever forget this place. In the winter it was not the cosiest place to be! Names like Crab, Crown and Anchor were names of exercises that gave us an insight to what lay ahead.

On one exercise at MURRAY FIRTH, we were launched into deep water off shore,

The wind was strong, then a snowstorm. In the DD tank my crew let out more air into the D SEA bag and gripped their mouth piece tighter, if we were to go down they would be ready. The sea became rough, two tanks were swamped, one man drowned. We lost 5 tanks, but for the Davis Escape Apparatus we would have lost far more men. The important lesson we learnt (as the tank ran down the ramp into the water), was only a few seconds for the driver to engage the propeller, so that the tank could move away from the Landing Craft. This was to prevent the ramp hitting the tank and breaking the screen as the craft moved up and down with the swell. Once the tank was in the water it could not get back onto the landing craft, so this was the only way to go, head for the shore.

Heavy sea and sudden swells made things very difficult; these were gruelling days of trial and error.

How memories flash through ones brain, suddenly I was aware of my crew looking at me. The expression on their faces...what now! Is this it?

I knew how they felt, my heart was beating faster, I thought, looking at their young faces. I am only 22 years old - who wants these strips. We all felt the same - so, with a nod of the head to my driver, "don't stall the engine, foot down hard Fred". To my wireless operator "signal is 2 Charlie . Don't forget the Germans over there are more scared than we are as they don't know what's going to hit them, but we do. Suddenly tension was released and they were laughing.

Then came the word 'mount up' - everyone climbed into their tank, head set on, each one taking their place in the tank until the ramp dropped. Then only the crew commander could see. I could see flashes from shells exploding on the beach. Overhead the sound of shells and rockets, the navy were giving the Germans hell - destroyers laying smoke screens...then down goes the ramp and for the first time the crew could see. We could see a house on fire, smoke billowing into the sky, overhead spitfires were diving on German strong points. Further in land bombers dropping their loads of bombs.

Our aim was to land on sword beach, capture the village of HERMANVILLE-SUR-MER then to attack two of the German strong points, code names MORRIS and HILLMAN.

Before leaving England, Sgt HAYGARTH and myself had studied maps and photos. Two tanks were to nose our way through the orchard on the left of MORRIS, this we did with no opposition, and from this point we could see into the back of the strong hold. I told my gunner to place 2 HE shots into the steel doors, also we could see back where C Squadron, with the SUFFOLK regiment, were making a frontal attack. But the infantry were being held up and losing men because in front of MORRIS the ground was heavily mined. We reported signals of our position, but we were told to come back and take up position left of the squadron. It did not take long to overrun Morris once the mines were cleared.

Next object was HILLMAN. This proved to be a harder job. On one attack tanks were to make a sweep over open ground, left of HILLMAN Sgt Haygarth, Sgt Smith, myself and two other tanks moved off at full speed ...500 yards and the Germans opened fire. My tank was hit twice, no one was hurt, but the noise of the shells made one grip their teeth. Sgt Haygarth's tank was hit and the driver badly wounded, wireless out of order, Sgt Haygarth giving orders for another driver to take over as all tanks turned back to head for cover. One other tank was hit, Commander Collins losing a leg. In all 4 tanks had been hit, 2 out of action, 3 of us made a further attack and were successful and later that afternoon HILLMAN was taken, It had been a very hard afternoon, adrenaline was running high. The commanders was getting Germans out of the trenches by throwing hand grenades from the turrets while other tanks moved round the far side at full speed to cut off the retreating enemy.

By 6oclock both the strongholds were in our hands. After the infantry had dug in we were ordered to retire to a small orchard, where our echelon were waiting to fill us up with petrol and ammo. While all this was going on, between 7.30 and 8 o'clock we watched Dakotas dropping supplies to the 6th airborne. Coloured parachutes filled the sky. By 8 O'clock we had moved back to HILLMAN to take up a 'turret down' position behind a ridge, as we expected a counter attack by the 21st Panther div. They had been reported to be in the area, we waited 4 hours by 12 o'clock we were pulled back to a wood near COLLEVILLE. Here we had food and an hour's sleep. At first light we were back in position near MORRIS.

Things were quiet in the afternoon, so we moved to take a position overlooking PEGASUS BRIDGE to support the 6th airborne that German tanks were attacking. We repelled the Germans. Then I had to take up a forward position 300yds by the bridge. At the side of bridge was a small café, over my radio came the voice of my troop officer Lt. Otley ." Barnes would you like a cup of coffee" looking back I saw him with a cup, and a big smile on his face, he then said "hard lines" I never did get that coffee. I thought some day I would go back for that coffee. Lt. Otley was a good officer and a good friend.

(30 years later I tried to contact him, I learnt he had died from a blood clot on his brain. Sgt. Haygarth another great friend had also died.)

During the day we sent off field post cards to home, letting our family know we were ok.

We had a look around the German stronghold MORRIS as they had left in a hurry

Maps, photos etc were scattered all over the place. We stayed there then new tanks and crews arrived to build up battered squadrons. We were in the harbour that night, my crew was looking after 3 prisoners that had been captured. During the night they

looked terrible, so I told my crew to give them some hot soup from a can (this was done by putting a lighted cigarette to the top of the can, instant hot soup)! My gunner wasn't too keen - after what we had gone through they weren't top of his list.

At 12 o'clock we were watching flares lighting up the sky, a young chap came along asking for me, his name was J. Banks, a replacement for my front gunner. Sorry to say he was killed a few weeks later aged 18.

The attack on BREVILLE is one I shall never forget. We moved fast as, in the wood, there were anti tanks guns, which destroyed a number of our tanks, and 3rd commandos were made down. Green Berries were lying all over the field. On my right flank, bodies and what was left of the German infantry. I had a job with my driver to run over parts of humans, but one could not stop as there was too many anti tank guns firing at us, after the battle we took a 'Stand To' position and the smell was terrible. Tank crew took it in turn to flush out some enemy infantry that was making it awkward for men of the Black Watch as the surrounding area was high grass and wooded. On the other side was open ground with small edges, just the place for 8mm gun. I decided the best attack was to go in fast, so I gave order to my driver to put his foot down, but he was reluctant to move fast. I think BREVILLE was still on his mind, because his excuse was the engine was not responding. After we had cleared the infantry, I said to my driver " the Commander in the turret can see all around but you drivers can only see straight ahead, and the slower he went the easier it was for the 88mm anti tank guns to spot us". I must say I had no trouble after that little talk.

Tank crews are not happy to be up on the front line at night, the infantry don't like us near them as we give their position away, the umm of the wireless can be heard a long way off in the still of the night.

Such was one night when we had to hold a position in case of a German attack the next morning. At about 12 o'clock midnight all hell let loose, the Herman Goring Lufwafin regiment made an attack (these were boys 16 to 18 trained to create havoc at night) exploding shells, machine gun fire, star shells etc.

I was in the middle of a field, at one end was a gate, a road running along side of it to a small wood. I had taken note of these details early that day, so looking into the dark for that gate, suddenly there was a flash on the side of my tank and the blast hit me in the eyes, I felt all bits pricking my eyeballs. I was blind; I do not know why I did not panic. I just sat on my seat and said to my crew "I can't see" I pulled down the hatch. My gunner put on the light and looked into my eyes, he informed me that they were full of bits and my forehead was slightly cut. With some cold tea that was left in a can, I started to wash my eyes, I heard my wireless operator reporting that his crew commander could not see. The reply was telling him it's a black night none of us can see.

I had to smile, not because of that remark, but because I could see a faint light as the gunner had not switched the light.

Half an hour later I could see and all this time the battle was raging. Throwing back the hatch I got my eyes used to the dark, they were sore but I could see figures running about, one came running towards my tank waving his arms. Now this was not the thing to do, I took out my revolver and fired over his head - his words came out very plain " I am English, you fool." I shouted back from the top of the tank " only a fool would come running toward a tank waving his arms about at night" off very slowly. We went through the gate just enough so we could get the gun

He wanted me to try and get through the small gate to stop anyone, and then he went pointing down the road - in training one of the things we learnt was if one was careful by lowering the gun down towards the ground a HE shell could be used just like skimming a pebble over water. This is what I did and the shell exploded in the air.

As daylight came things went quiet. Pat our troop officer came over to see me and jokingly said " by the look of your eyes you must have been on the tiles or too much to drink, where was the party! Are you Ok? He insisted I went to first aid to have them cleaned out.

When I got back he was talking to another officer. Pat said, " this is the man you shot at last night I replied "it's a good job I am a good shot." But you missed" he said.

I replied" just think what would have happened if I had aimed at you " We all had a good laugh and off he went to his regiment. I think Pat had told him how lucky he was as part of our training is "if a person doesn't make himself or herself known before approaching a tank - shoot first and ask question after."

A counter attack developed by enemy infantry. This was beaten off. Then it was reported that enemy tanks, self-propelled guns and others were moving northwards to CUVERVILLE. First reports were 25 then 20 in all about 43 the enemy split up into two groups. My gunner claimed 2, the 13/18th had a good shoot, and about 17 enemy tanks destroyed, the following days were spent in discomfort from shells and airbursts.

The regiment were to be given a break, fighting had been hard and all the hard training had paid off.

We retired to a village on the coast called LUC-SUR-MER here we were able to have a bath, sleep in some sort of a bed and good food that our cooks dished up.

It had been sleeping in the hull of the tank and eating hard tack.

The stay was short at 2 o'clock in the morning 8th July we moved into battle formation, the attack under cover of artillery about 4 o'clock first light on EPERON. The battle went on all day by 10 o'clock that night the infantry were

'Dug in' - EPERON was ours.

Next move was to take CAEN, on 6th August the 13/18th Hussars supporting the 129 Infantry Brigade made an assault on the western foothills of MOUNT PINCON.

Which covered the whole sector from the river VIRE, the day was very hot, sun was scorching, the battle never stopped, the infantry were pinned down on every attempt, by evening, hopes were fading of success - Then with 5 other tanks we found our way across the ditch in the face of all German attempts to stop us with bazookas and everything they had. We never faltered and drove to the top of this steep hill like a mountain. We were surrounded by the enemy, and shot it out until the remainder of the squadron joined us. From then on the American armour was now in full swing, the break out was on, One could never remember everything of a battle.

About September, after speeding on to the Albert canal at BERINGEN where the Guards were having difficulty enlarging a bridgehead. By evening we, with a battery of Essex Yeomanry and surrounded by the enemy at BEVERLOO, we formed a square - but the Germans did not put it to the test. Later BOURG LEOPOLD was captured by the 13/18 Hussars. After 4 days rest, this had been the first stand down since D.Day. The next operation was (code name) MARKET GARDEN - Holland.

We arrived at NIJMEGEN where the bridge over the river WAAL had been captured by the 82nd United States Airborne Div. Supported by the Guards Armoured Tanks, the 13/18th Hussars attacking the village of ELST fighting in Holland all September, it was here the war ended for me. During one of the battles my tank started to tilt over as the ground gave way, from some explosion. I gave the order to abandon tank and as I climbed out of the turret, a shell exploded behind me blowing me off the tank. I hit the ground; I stood up running my hands over my back, which felt like someone had hit me with an iron bar. Trying to get my breath back, I heard someone shout "over here" I started to run when I was hit in the leg. I fell and rolled into a shell hole, The shrapnel had cut the nerve in my leg, but my crew was OK as they gathered round me. My good friend Sgt Haygarth jumped off his tank and put his arms around me as shells were exploding. That was the last I saw of them as I was taken back to England where I stayed in hospital. The war was over and I was discharged from the army.

45 years later I contacted my crew and friends; others had died or been killed.

No words can ever explain the horrors of war, the smell of burning flesh or the sight of friends, who you had lived with over the years, their bodies being blown apart and you being left with the remains to identify.

But there were good times to remember. In 1939 while in France, before the Germans invaded, we made our own entertainment; I was in the mouth organ band, which for weeks had been practising the song called "3 little fishes"

One day the priest asked if we would play for him at a sermon he was going to hold in the barn. He said " I know you have been practising '3 little fishes' but this will be a change for you."

Well, on Sunday we sat on an old hay cart, all the squadron assembled, the parson said the first hymn will be 'Abide With Me'. We set off in great gusto, then one of the chaps, very softly, started to play '3 little fishes,' then all the band joined in and the squadron were singing in full voice. The parson enjoyed it.

Many more such stories could be told. If asked "wouldn't I have been better at home than in the army" I would have to say no; the comradeship in the army was second to none.

I felt proud to be in a regiment that led the invasion to the defeat of Hitler and the release of those countries that suffered under the Nazis.